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SUBJECT: RUSSIAN DUMA DEFENSE COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN TOUR
D'HORIZON

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Viktor Zavarzin, Chairman of the State Duma Defense Committee, gave his annual briefing to Moscow's military attache corps December 12. During the 90-minute presentation, Zavarzin summarized his committee's legislative activities -- weapons modernization and improvements in servicemen's salaries and working conditions -- and future priorities -- more weapons modernization and transformation to a professional, volunteer military. He touched upon several international hotspots, hewing to the GOR's line on Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, North Korea, and Kosovo. The Duma had not yet received the NATO Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) for consideration, but Zavarzin, without mentioning any specific timeframe, indicated it would "likely" be ratified. END SUMMARY.

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MORE MONEY FOR WEAPONS AND TROOPS

¶2. (SBU) Duma Defense Committee Chairman Zavarzin (a retired Colonel-General) relied mainly on prepared remarks during his annual summary of legislative activities for Moscow's military attache corps. He emphasized at the outset that the Duma had responded positively to President Vladimir Putin's address to the Federal Assembly in May, which had focused on the need to modernize weapons systems and improve living and working conditions for military servicemen. However, he declined to get into the details of individual weapons programs, noting that General Yuriy Baluyevskiy, Chief of the General Staff, would brief on these subjects the following day. For the first time in recent memory, the Defense Committee invited embassy political officers to the briefing.

¶3. (SBU) Among the issues that Zavarzin highlighted:

-- While individual political parties might disagree on the tactics used to achieve national security goals, all agreed that the defense establishment was an important component of the nation's strength.

-- The defense component of the 2007 national budget would see an increase of more than 20% (in nominal terms) over the current budget.

-- Legislative priorities over the past year included harmonization of disparate laws, especially those focused on countering terrorism, and allocation of significant funds to procure weapons.

-- Servicemen and retirees will see real increases in salaries and pensions over the next several years, with future raises indexed to the inflation rate; salaries for

instructors at military schools and some select categories of research scientists would also increase.

-- Housing conditions for the military will improve through a coordinated program of enhanced mortgage availability, an increase in housing allowances, government purchase of additional apartments and houses, and an allocation of three billion rubles for housing construction. Five regions, including Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Kaliningrad, will receive extra money for housing construction in light of higher costs in these areas.

-- The use of modern weapons demands a higher calibre of soldier. In spite of continuing downward demographic trends, the military will steadily move toward a higher mix of volunteer contract soldiers versus conscripts, though the number of the former will never reach 100 percent. Contract soldiers are generally older than conscripts and have more material needs, which in turn will require greater resources to improve recruitment and retention of such personnel.

-- Future personnel-related plans call for greater attention to pension security, including survivor benefits for families and educational opportunities for children of deceased servicemen.

-- The nation's continually improving financial health should allow for increased allocation of resources for personnel and weapons modernization, maintenance of adequate readiness forces, recruitment and development of a professional non-commissioned officer corps, and consideration of multi-year procurement plans in sufficient quantities to re-equip 200 military units by 2016.

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IRAQ, IRAN, AFGHANISTAN, NORTH KOREA, AND KOSOVO

¶4. (SBU) Zavarzin also reviewed GOR policies regarding several international hotspots:

-- An adequate resolution of the situation in Iraq can be achieved only by working through the UN, including compliance with UNSCR resolutions. All nations should promote dialogue among Iraqis to prevent civil war. Consultations with Iran will also be necessary.

-- Russia is encouraging Iran to take a constructive approach to resolve its dispute over the use of nuclear power and is urging Tehran to comply with IAEA safeguards. In the meantime, Russia will continue to assist in the construction of the Bushehr power plant.

-- The complicated situation in Afghanistan requires continued Russian support for the international mission in that country. However, NATO should do more to decrease narcotics trafficking and terrorism. In this respect, establishing a cordon sanitaire might be necessary. Counter-narcotics training will continue in Moscow.

-- Russia condemns North Korean nuclear testing and will work with the international community to find a solution.

-- An independent Kosovo could set a precedent with universal applicability. Russia does not understand the West's general insistence on respect for territorial integrity, while it ignores the concept in the case of Kosovo. The current timetable to determine Kosovo's final status is moving too quickly and does not take into consideration the interests of Serbia or ethnic Serbs in Kosovo.

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COOPERATION WITH SCO AND NATO

¶ 15. (SBU) According to Zavarzin, Russia appreciates the global role that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) could eventually play and welcomes deepening integration among its members. The SCO is not an offensive organization and should not be perceived as a threat. Its priorities are preservation of regional security, counter-terrorism, and counter-narcotics.

¶ 16. (SBU) Moscow is generally satisfied with its relationship with NATO, but Zavarzin noted that disagreements continued on such issues as missile defense, in which Russia would prefer to share a "common umbrella" with the Alliance to protect against missile threats. Russia welcomes further cooperation with both NATO and the EU but only when such cooperation advances Russia's security in concrete terms.

¶ 17. (SBU) On NATO SOFA ratification, Zavarzin explained that the agreement was still with the government, which continued to sort out various legal issues that did not conform with Russian law. He anticipated that the Duma would receive the SOFA next year, where it would "likely" be ratified; however, he did not specify a more precise timeframe.

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COMMENT

¶ 18. (SBU) While Zavarzin did not break new ground in his briefing, his relatively positive outlook regarding the NATO SOFA's ultimate ratification was noteworthy even in the absence of a specific timeframe.

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